

Reading Societies in Iceland

Their foundation, Role, and the Destiny of Their Book Collections

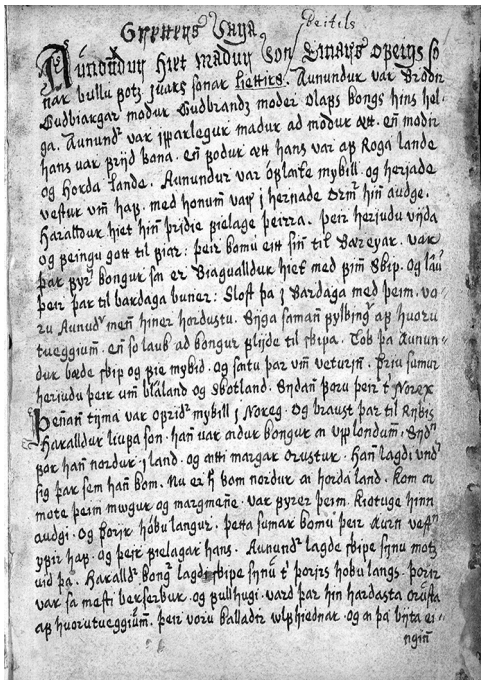
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The main aim of this article is to look at how collections of printed reading material for use by the Icelandic public developed, compared to the development in the neighbouring countries; and an attempt is made to trace what became of their book collections. The article is divided into seven sections:

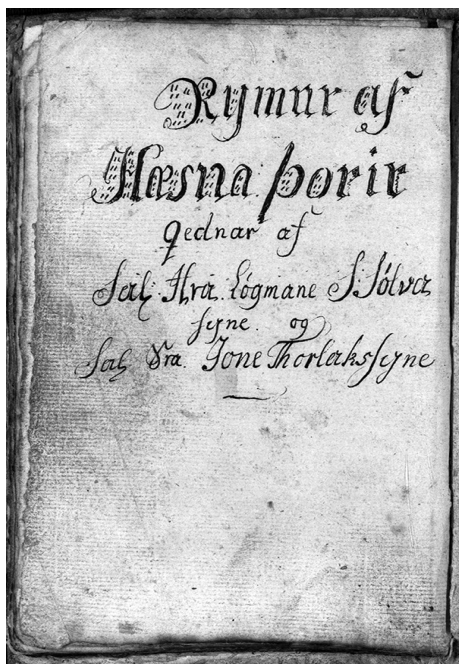
1. Introduction
2. Reading societies for the public or a part of the public
3. Foundation, role and operation of reading societies
4. Circulating libraries
5. Difficulties in the operation of reading societies
7. Fate of the collections of the social libraries
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Sources used for information on the development of reading societies in Iceland were mostly published Icelandic sources, but also archival

ones. This topic has been addressed by several writers; that applies to the development of particular reading societies [1], as well as their development in particular areas of the country [2] and the development of reading societies in the country as a whole [3]. These writers have, however, neither addressed the development within the neighbouring countries for comparison nor have they addressed how the reading societies developed, or traced what became of their book collections. To gather information on these latter issues, some of the findings of two surveys carried out by the author in 1989 and 2001, and annual reports of public libraries compiled at the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture were used, in addition to documents at the National Archives of Iceland [4]. The main sources of developments in neighbouring countries are the books *Library spirit in the Nordic and Baltic countries: Historical perspectives* (2009) [5] and *Introduction to librarianship* by Gates (c1968) [6].



Handmade books were read during the evening wakes. The picture shows the 1st page of Grettis Saga in handwriting. Such books were often without a titlepage like this one. The manuscript was written in the period from 1635–1699 (picture from the National and University of Iceland, published with permission).



Like the sagas, the rhymed ballades were popular reading material during the evening wakes. The picture shows the titlepage and the 1st page of the ballade of Hænsna-Þóris rýmur, made by Lawyer S[veinn] Sölva-son land Rev. Jón Þorláksson, probably in the period 1800–1824. Written by Einar Pálsson at Mælifell in the north of Iceland (picture from the National and University Library of Iceland, published with permission).

Introduction

The art of writing in the Latin alphabet was introduced in Iceland in the wake of the adoption of Christianity as a state religion in the year 1000. Since the Middle Ages a tradition of handwritten books developed both original works and copies of existing works [7]. A written literary culture thus existed amongst the Icelandic public since the Middle Ages. Its products were of use at the evening wakes during the winter months where handwritten books and printed religious texts were read out loud by someone while the rest of the household worked on some manual task. Recitals and telling news were also practiced at the evening wakes [8].

Printing with separate characters was introduced in Iceland around 1530 and around the same time books in Icelandic are known to have been printed abroad [9]. Almost to the end of the 19th century

HYGE-PÖZZILLA/
 EDEN
 EYN SALLERAN
 WEDDRA
 ILN
 Wper ell Hantida og Simindaga Gudfridd
 Aared Wm Kieging.
 Gioridar
 2p
 Beledla og Reletiwercugum Gudsperum typce
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 VIDALIN.
 Gyrrer Parturken
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 Puntilla a Nestum i Niallador/ Ap Martine X
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Reading societies for the public or a part of the public

The reading societies offered reading material different from handwritten Icelandic books and religious publications. Their foundation has, in a similar way to the foundation of reading societies in the neighbouring countries, been considered to be an offspring of the Enlightenment, as well as a national awakening and a fight for independence in the countries that were not independent at the time [13].

Gates identified two kinds of book collections for common use: the circulating or lending libraries operated to provide the owners with some income and the social libraries operated to secure reading material for a given group of individuals, on a not-for-profit basis. Of the latter there were two forms: the proprietary (or joint stock libraries) based on ownership of shares in the property of the library, and the subscription or association libraries based on payments of a subscription fee. In the proprietary libraries only shareholders had library privileges, but all who paid a subscription fee could use subscription libraries [14].

Almost all reading societies in Iceland were of the social library type. They can be divided into two kinds; on the one hand those that formed social library collections owned by members, and on the other hand those that sold their books once members had read them or when they had become worn, in order to raise funds for the purchase of new ones. One circulating library is known to have operated in the country. There were also examples of people buying books co-operatively for common use without founding a reading society [15]. For the most part non-members were not able to borrow reading society books, although such stipulations changed with time, and non-members could in some reading societies rent books for a fee. This is reminiscent of the circulating libraries [16], making them into a kind of hybrid reading society and circulating library. When the first Public Libraries Act came into force in 1955, many of the reading societies became units in the public library system and the collections of others became the main book stock of the public

libraries. Then the operations were funded by public funds and all people in the community could borrow books, as described below.

Foundation, role and operation of reading societies

Multinational ideologies were introduced in Iceland in the 19th century. In their wake followed the foundation of various kinds of associations and societies for betterment and progress, which was similar to the developments within the neighbouring countries [17]. Apart from reading societies, these were, for example, temperance societies, trading societies, youth associations, agricultural societies and women's societies. During the 19th century hundreds of associations were founded in Iceland. Their founders were mostly farmers although some also belonged to other classes. Moreover some of these associations established reading societies within their boundaries in a similar way to such developments in other countries [18]. The reading societies were founded with the purpose of kindling an interest in reading, improving the educational status of members, providing a good selection of reading material (in particular educational material, although that changed with time) and to make self education possible [19]. Access to the collections of reading societies was, however, uneven; Jón Jónsson [20] estimates that around 1890 the majority of Icelanders were without access to such collections.

The reasons for the foundation of reading societies

In Europe collections of reading material open to the public were formed early on. In the 18th century circulating libraries and reading societies or associations were established. This happened also in Iceland where the first reading societies were founded towards the end of the 18th century and the first and only circulating library known to the author was founded in the 19th century [21].

In the neighbouring countries, the foundation of reading societies was not only linked to the Enlightenment, but also linked to the social changes that were brought on by the transformation from an agricultural to an industrial economy that started at the beginning of the 19th century. Industrialization needed craftspeople and unskilled workers to have both different and greater knowledge and skills than was necessary before. Commerce and trade also increased and, likewise, that development needed a knowledgeable workforce. Coupled with a growing population, these changes brought on the need to read books [22]. The aim of founding reading societies was to civilize the common man and make him better qualified for life and work in the changing society of that time. All this would result in a strengthening of nations through education and knowledge that would lead to more efficient working methods. To this end, the upper or educated classes established libraries for use by farmers and workers [23].

In Iceland the establishment of reading societies that began at the end of the 18th century can, apart from the influence of the Enlightenment and other multinational ideologies, not have been a consequence of the same kind of developments as noted above. During the 19th century Icelanders were mostly farmers (82.3%) and fishermen (5.7%), only 1.7% earned a living by industry, handicraft, communications and commerce [24]. Events that brought on effects similar to some of the effects of the industrialization in other countries (namely, changes in the residential pattern that led to the formation of more densely populated areas) only started at the beginning of the 20th century in Iceland. They were caused by the advent of machine driven fishing vessels (facilitated by the discovery of oil) and the use of trawlers and ice-houses that revolutionized marine fishing, because they made it possible for the fishermen to reside further away from the fishing grounds and to have fresh bait the whole year around. Denmark, the power ruling Iceland at the time, was the first European country to use motors in fishing boats at the end of the 19th century [25], and from there this new technology was brought to Iceland.

The reasons for the establishment of reading societies must have been the desire of the inhabitants to improve society in the spirit of the ideologies for betterment and progress introduced in Iceland at the time. This was evident in various sources, amongst them the laws of the Reading Society at Langidalur, founded in 1846, according to which members were to receive questions every year on matters of interest to the community that they had to answer; such as on trading, farming, and other matters of local interest. Members would reply to the questions with articles on the matter. A selection of these articles was published by the Reading Society in 1857 in the publication *Húnvetningur*. The intention to continue these activities came to nothing when it became apparent that not all who were interested in joining the Reading Society felt confident to write good articles, and they would not join the Reading Society unless they were able to fulfil all the duties of membership. Therefore this stipulation in the laws of the Reading Society was discontinued in April 1863 [26].

Other evidence for the desire to improve the community is to be found in an article written in 1878 in the journal *Skuld*, under the pseudonym A. Breiðdælingr by a person in the east of Iceland, according to whom there were two major obstacles for progress in Iceland. One was the lack of associations as a venue for co-operative projects for improvements, and the other was a lack of education. In the author's opinion progress could be achieved by everybody joining forces through working together in associations; not only the farmers but also the farmhands. Moreover it was necessary that the young people also took part. The author proposed the foundation of an agricultural association for working on progress in agriculture, a fisheries association to work on progress in the fisheries and reading societies for improving the educational state of the population. According to the author all should join reading societies and thereby try to help themselves improve their educational state, and for that purpose each parish or district should join a reading society: "If everyone joins such a society all can borrow books. For although that would not be enough for the enlightenment of the common people it might lead

to progress, that in turn would lead to the publishing of educational books that are so much needed in Iceland” [27]

Interestingly, Jón Ólafsson, the editor of *Skuld*, was opposed to the idea of the masses joining reading societies. He argued that the establishment of reading societies in each district would lead to the establishment of around 170 reading societies, and given that all the inhabitants joined them, the market for books in Iceland would shrink to only 170 copies of each title being sold and thereby no publishing could take place in the country [28]. This same matter had been addressed by Jóhannes Guðmundarson ten years earlier in 1868, when he argued that reading societies only whet the appetite of people for reading material. According to Jóhannes subscriptions to journals had greatly increased in his community since the establishment of the reading society. Moreover some people had joined the Literary Association (Bókmenntafélagið), but no one had been a member prior to the operation of the reading society and it was unlikely in his opinion that a greater number of books were sold in other Icelandic communities than his after the foundation of the reading society [29].

One of the reasons for people believing in self-education through reading may have been the long standing Icelandic tradition of book-making by hand and the use of books during the evening wakes, see above.

Founders

In Iceland the upper classes established reading societies for their own use. Although there is one example of a reading society that was established by a clergyman and his wife for the use of the common people, most reading societies were established by members of all classes in a given community. On many occasions, the common people were most numerous amongst the initiators founding reading societies. Reading societies were also established by associations operated by all classes for their members’ use.

Reading societies founded by the upper classes for their own use

In Iceland the first reading societies, i.e. The Icelandic Library and Reading Society of Southern Iceland (Hið íslenska bókasafn og lestrarfélag Suðurlands), founded in 1790, and the Book Reading Society of Northern Iceland (Hið Norðlenska bóklestrarfélag), founded in 1792, were established by members of the upper classes. They were located in centres of power that were forming in the country at the time, for their own use. The same applies to other reading societies that were founded by senior civil servants at the beginning of the 19th century, e.g. the Barðastrandasýslu Reading Society (Barðastrandasýslu lestrarfélag), that also went by the name of the Reading Society of useful Danish Books (Lestrarfélag þarflegra danskra bóka) founded in 1801 [30]. Another example was the Reading Society of Ísafjörður (Lestrarfélag Ísafjarðar) founded in 1897. These societies were short-lived [31]. Their founding members were probably able to get hold of reading material by means other than membership of a reading society; but the common people had no such option.

The books of The Icelandic Library and Reading Society of Southern Iceland were sold in 1828 and the money from the sale donated to The National Library of Iceland (Landsbókasafn Íslands) that had been founded in 1818. It is believed that the books of the Book Reading Society of Northern Iceland went to the Quarter Library at Akureyri (Amtsbókasafnið á Akureyri). The Möllerian reading societies (Möllersku lestrarfélögin) founded in 1833 by Professor Jens Möller of Copenhagen for Icelandic clergymen have also been considered an example of reading societies founded by an upper class member for the clergymen, although their use changed as the century wore on and users were in some instances members of other kinds of upper classes such as public officials, merchants, and even farmers [32]. The reason why the role of clergymen, regarding the reading societies, was no greater than was to be expected of any educated member of society as argued by Jón Jónsson, and not as great

as in the neighbouring countries may partly have been their access to reading material in the Mölleric reading societies. The foundation of reading societies by the upper classes for their own use was similar to the developments in the neighbouring countries [33].

A reading society founded by the upper classes for use by the common people

One reading society is known to have been established by members of the upper classes, namely the Betterment Institute of Flatey in Breiðafjörður (Framfarastofnunin í Flatey) founded by the clergyman and his wife in 1833. Their aim was to provide the common people with access to useful knowledge and interesting reading material free of charge. The same clergyman was also the chairman of the Mölleric reading society of Barðastrandarprófastsdæmi and kept its books (of a different selection from that of the Betterment Institute) also in Flatey; on that small island two reading societies were operated at the time [34]. Similar developments were common in the neighbouring countries where the upper classes founded reading societies with the aim of improving the common people, as noted above [35].

Reading societies founded by members of all classes for their own use

The first reading society founded by the common people in Iceland for their own use was the Reading Society of Guðdælir (Lestrarfélag Guðdæla) on Barðaströnd, the southern part of the North West Peninsula (Vestfirðir) in 1843. Its foundation was probably influenced by the foundation of the Betterment Institute of Flatey in Breiðafjörður, noted above [36]. The founding of reading societies by members of all classes subsequently spread around the country to the west, north, east, and all the way to Vestmannaeyjar south of Iceland [37].

Worthy of note is the social standing, educational level and age of some of the founders of reading societies for use by all classes in Iceland in the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. These factors were completely different from those in the neighbouring countries. In Iceland farmers, farmers' sons and even hired workmen founded and operated reading societies for their own use [38]. Although some have argued that the clergymen were particularly active in founding and operating reading societies for the public others have argued differently, see above. The examples below serve to illustrate that their part was not as great as in the neighbouring countries, although they took part in the foundation and operation of reading societies along with other members of society. Thus amongst the 30 founders of the Reading Society at Mývatn (Lestrarfjelað Mývetninga) in the north of the country in 1858 there were only 2 clergymen, 1 local authority (hreppstjóri) and 27 farmers [39]. In 1852 a reading society was founded in Biskupstungur in the south of the country by 11 farmers, 4 farmer's sons, 1 clergyman and 1 lawyer [40]. Another noteworthy fact is the age of the founders. The foundation of the Reading Society at Mývatn was proposed by a 22 year old man [41], the founders of the first Reading Society in Langidalur were school boys [42], those initiating the foundation of the Reading Society at Svalbarðsströnd in 1891 were 15–23 years of age [43], and in the west of the country the establishment of the reading society of Patrekshreppur in 1933 was initiated by a 16 year old boy at a meeting of the Workers Union [44].

In the neighbouring countries reading societies were typically founded by religious and worldly social leaders, such as clergymen, bishops, judges, teachers and other educated persons in the spirit of the Enlightenment. The aim was to enable common people to become more able to take part in the new society that was forming at the time; and to kindle an interest amongst them in becoming active in their own enlightenment [45]. The cottage libraries in Sweden described by Torstensson were founded in the hope that they would lessen the consumption of alcohol [46]. In Iceland there is one example, known to the authors, of the foundation of a reading society for that purpose [47].

Torstensson argues that the farmers in Iceland and Norway were strong and more independent because these countries did not have a tradition of nobility [48]. In the same way it could perhaps be argued that in these two countries the lack of nobility may have granted the farmers a social status comparable to that of the noblemen in other countries. Moreover a middle class hardly existed in Iceland at the time and the farmers will likewise have had to assume its role [49]. Therefore they may have felt that they could and should establish reading societies. Undoubtedly the fact of how sparsely populated Iceland was, coupled with the lack of a proper road system (in many areas the roads were not usable by motor cars until past the middle of the 20th century) certainly contributed to this development. The common people had to be able to cope on their own and if progress was to be made they would have to work at it themselves.

Reading societies as educational institutions

Early on the church took interest in the education of children. This is apparent from the order of the synod of Mentz in the year 800 to the effect 'that parochial priests should establish schools in all towns and villages to teach letters to children'. Although repeated in other councils, these orders could only be carried out in larger cities; rural areas remained without common schools. While the teachers in these schools were not always ecclesiastics, the church supervised the teaching and made sure that religion was also taught [50]. Interest in and influence of the church in the education of children was carried over to the Lutheran countries, where the church was influential in the education of children. In the Nordic countries (apart from Iceland) the parish libraries, considered to be educational institutions for the common people, were established under the auspices of the church, even if the funds had to be gathered through private donations and collections. During the 19th century primary school systems were built in the Nordic countries [51]. In Iceland, education, including teaching

the skill of reading, remained the responsibility of the family and took place in the home up to the beginning of the 20th century. This was evident from a regulation issued in 1790 in the Bishopric of Skálholt in the south of Iceland according to which parents were to pay a fine should their child not be able to read at the age of seven. Children were to be fully educated in the skill of reading and in Christianity before the age of fourteen. In cases where the regulation was not followed children could be taken away from their parents and brought up elsewhere at the cost of the parents [52]. The clergymen only tested the reading knowledge of the congregation. Teaching took place during the evening wakes that have been considered an educational institution and of economic importance for the survival of households of the Icelandic farms. Incidentally it was often considered more convenient to teach children to read from handwritten books than the printed ones, because knowing to read handwriting they could easily read printed texts but not the other way around [53].

When the first reading societies for public use were founded in Iceland during the 19th century and until the beginning of the 20th century the Icelandic situation was therefore different from that in the other Nordic countries. Founding a reading society must have strengthened the traditional role of the evening wakes as educational institutions by providing more varied and in many cases educational reading material. Thus most of the books read in the home of an informant at Eyrarbakki on the south coast of Iceland during the evening wakes around 1890 came from the reading society, as reported by Bjarni Bjarnason [54]. The same goes for the reading material at the evening wakes in Laxárdalur in the North of Iceland shortly before the middle of the 20th century as described by Hákon Jónsson in his memoirs [55]. Therefore it is appropriate to conclude that in the same vein as the Lutheran church was active in initiating the foundation of parish libraries in the neighbouring countries to maintain its role in the education of parish members, the Icelandic farmers initiated the establishment of reading societies that were considered educational institutions [56] to maintain their role in the education of the members of their households.

Collections of books for particular professions apart from the upper classes

Apart from the first reading societies founded by senior civil servants for their own use and the Mölleric reading societies (Möllersku lest-rarfélögin) for clergymen, noted above, there was at least one reading society founded for use by migratory fishermen at a fishing station; namely the Reading Society of Þorlákshöfn Fishing Station on the south coast of Iceland around 1890. This Society had the habit of selling books that were in bad condition at the end of each fishing season with the result that a large book collection did not form, but around 150 books were considered to have been in its book collection at any given time; when the operation of this fishing station was discontinued after 1920 its book collection vanished [57]. Migratory fishermen are also believed to have been very active in founding the Reading Society at Stokkseyri, another fishing village on the south coast of Iceland, although information on its foundation is scarce. It did not receive any public support. Jóhann V. Daníelsson, who later became a merchant, is believed to have been interested in its foundation [58]. The third example of access by migratory fishermen to reading material was that a part of the book collection of the Reading Society of Tröllatungu og Fellsstaðasafnaða was lent north to Gjögur in the north west of Iceland for twelve weeks during the fishing season for use by the migratory fishermen stationed there [59]. Yet another example of provision of reading material to fishermen is from 1924 when the Library of the Common people in Reykjavík (founded in 1923; now Reykjavík City Library) started lending books to ships. This service is ongoing and later became available to ships registered outside of Reykjavík. Moreover, public libraries at other fishing ports started to offer the same kind of service to seamen. The main problem in the early days was that Icelandic seamen cleaned their hands with fish liver oil and the oil badly affected the condition of the books [60]. These services are comparable to the services of the Ship Library (Skeppsbibliotek) in the Åland Islands described by

Öberg [61]. Amongst the reading societies receiving public funding (i.e. from the state and municipality) 1938–1939 was the Library of the fishermen at Sandgerði, and amongst the fifty largest libraries in 1947 were the libraries of one fishermen's association, two sailors' homes and three sailors' reading rooms, in addition to an industrial library in Reykjavík [62]. It is of interest to note in this context that in addition to book reading other kinds of literary activities took place at the fishing stations. It is known that fishermen worked as scribes for Jón at Simbakot as noted below and it is believed that books were also written in other fishing stations, because some manuscripts look like they were written outside; and at the fishing stations a special genre of poetry developed [63]. The operation of reading societies for migrating fishermen can be likened to the operation of workers' libraries in Sweden and Finland, in the sense that they were established for a special class of people. But a closer look at their purposes and collections is needed to find the similarities and differences between these reading societies in Iceland on the one hand, and in Sweden and Finland on the other hand. The libraries and book services for the Icelandic fishermen were meant to provide them with reading material in locations where nothing else was available, while in Sweden and Finland it seems to have been to provide them with reading material different from what was already available [64].

Circulating libraries

The circulating libraries were established to make money for the owners, commonly booksellers, who rented books in addition to selling them. This service catered to those with an interest in popular reading material, and the customers were mostly women. Due to the size of their operations, they were able to influence the content, style, and format of novels. Mudie's Circulating library in London for example, although originally established for the lending of non-fiction, accounted for around 75% of a popular edition of a novel in the 19th

century [65]. And in Dresden in Germany the three largest circulating libraries had a combined stock of 60,000 volumes. Such libraries were operated in every town in Western Europe at the end of the 18th century, including the Baltic and Nordic countries [66]. The idea of renting books was not new, however. In the medieval universities in Europe books or written texts were rented to university students [67].

Although Gates considers the contribution of the circulating libraries to American library development negligible [68], it stands to reason, in view of the size of their operations in Great Britain and Dresden, that the circulating libraries must have had a great influence on the reading capabilities of their clients. This, in turn, must have influenced the foundation and success of reading societies and, in their wake, public libraries.

Jón Jónsson's circulating library

Operations abroad of the circulating, lending or renting libraries were known in Iceland. According to Ingibjörg Steinunn Sverrisdóttir [69], Stefán Þórarinnsson superior magistrate of the Northern district in Iceland, who was one of the founders of the Book Reading Association in the North of Iceland noted above, argued for the foundation of a social library and against founding a renting library on the grounds that Icelanders were too few and the population too dispersed for the operation of such a library to be viable.

In the 19th century, at a time when reading societies and associations were founded in Iceland, such a renting collection was established at Eyrarbakki, a fishing village on the south coast of Iceland by Jón Jónsson (1834-1912) at Simbakot, a farmer and a foreman on his own fishing boat. He bought printed books when he was able to, copied literary texts by hand (although seldom after printed texts) and hired good scribes from amongst the migrating fishermen to write books, when they had to stay ashore due to stormy weather. Jón had been wealthy because of an inheritance from his parents, and through his

own work, but had at the end of his life become a pauper. After his death, his library both the published books and manuscripts were sold at an auction and dispersed to 27 new owners. Reportedly, some of the borrowers of Jón's books were unable to pay for their use and the books became lost or damaged when sent back and forth due to the hazardous methods of travelling in Iceland [70]. Jón Jónsson's fate and that of his library proves that superior magistrate Stefán Þórarinnsson was right in predicting that this library form was not viable in Iceland.

Difficulties in the operation of libraries for the common people in Iceland

At the beginning of the 18th century Icelanders were farmers who sustained themselves by farming and fishing. The country was sparsely populated, villages were few, and there were no cities. Towards the end of that century, when the first reading societies were founded, this was changing, albeit slowly at first [71]. Some factors that made the development and operations of reading societies difficult were the lack of a proper transportation system on land, poverty, barter trading, little and inadequate housing facilities and diseases. These problems meant that it proved in many cases difficult to maintain the reading societies operational, and the life of some of them depended on the initiatives and financial capabilities of individual members. But even when operations were limited or non-existent for a while, many reading societies were revived or reborn under a new name, when the times became easier; some remained operational for over a century and a few were still operational when this was written. There are also examples of the operation of a reading society being taken over by different party [72].

Transportation

Difficulties in transportation in Iceland made the operation of reading societies in many communities difficult, let alone the operation of one reading society serving more communities. The following examples serve to give an idea of these difficulties: Bakkafjörður in the north east of the country became connected by a road to Þórshöfn around 1950; postal services to Bakkafjörður were initiated in 1850 and at that time mail was delivered once per year; Búðir a village at Fáskrúðsfjörður, in the east of Iceland could not be reached by car until past 1950 [73]. When the reading society at Svalbarðsströnd was founded in 1891, see above, there were 220 inhabitants. The community could not be reached by a motor car; a telephone connection came some thirty years later and electricity even later [74].

In some communities many reading societies were operated simultaneously, because of the primitive transportation system [75]. When the operations of reading societies covered a large geographic area, books were liable to get damaged or even lost during transportation.



Specially made chests were used in the north of Iceland to transport reading society books between farms. The picture shows such a chest that was owned and used by a reading society in Lýtingsstaðahreppur, Skagafirði. Books of the last delivery are still in the chest (photograph Jón Sævar Baldvinsson).

Reading societies covering a smaller geographic area fared better. The laws and regulations for many reading societies had stipulations on the responsibility of the borrowers to compensate for damaged books [76], which indicates that books were often damaged.

Funding the operation of reading societies of the common people: Poverty and the lack of money

The reading societies were funded by members' subscription fees, with money from fund raising activities, and in some cases money from their parent associations, for example the youth associations. It seems that the First Day of Summer, a traditional Icelandic holiday, was conserved for the fund raising activities of the reading society in many communities. Not all communities provided financial support to the reading societies prior to the first legal act on reading societies that came into force in 1937. It stipulated grants from the state budget to reading societies in rural areas that had ten or more members (it was customary that only one person from each household was a member), as long as the local communities provided at least an equal sum [77]. In spite of this act, funding continued to be a problem and the local funding exceeded the state funding in most cases [78].

In the early days, besides poverty, the lack of money was a difficulty amongst the common people. It could prove difficult for many a member to pay the subscription fee, because trading was mostly barter trading and money was needed to buy books. In the laws of the first reading society established by the common people in 1843, *Lestrarfélag Guðdæla*, see above, there was a stipulation to the effect that the annual subscription fee could be paid with products accepted as payment at the community store [79]. A similar stipulation was found in the regulations for the reading society of *Rauðisandur* founded in 1898 (both societies were in the north west of Iceland). It stated that the yearly subscription fee could be paid in merchandise, such as mittens knitted from single-threaded yarn, butter, wool and

other merchandise sellable at the community store [80]. Reportedly, the annual contribution to the reading society at Munkaþverárhreppur founded in 1858 in the north of the country was paid by one member with potatoes that he had grown himself, while another member paid his membership contribution by working on the cashier's farm [81]. This meant that in such cases the cashiers might have had to be able to supply money instead of the farm products and labour that was provided by members as a payment of the annual subscription fee.

Epidemic diseases

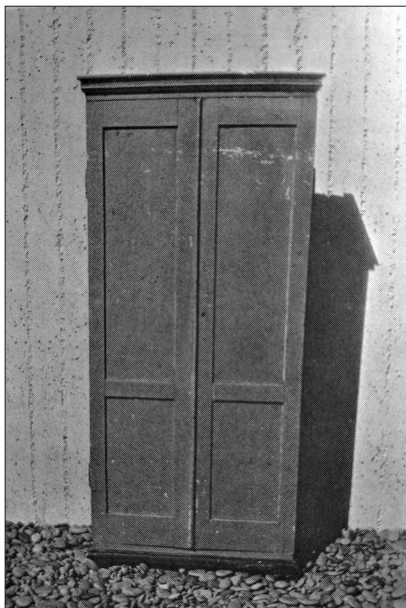
Disease also limited the operations of the reading societies. Jóhannes Guðmundarson, the president, librarian, and cashier of the Langidalur Reading Society (see above) writes that during the time of the disease of the scab on sheep (1858–1859), operations of the reading society were stopped temporarily. This was because people did not have time to read books and because they were afraid to go from one farm to the next due to the risk of infection. In 1859 only six members remained in the Reading Society and on the 20th of November 1860 Jóhannes summoned members of the Reading Society to a meeting and told them that during previous years he had had to lend the Society money. By that time he was willing to write-off the debt provided that members joined forces and wholeheartedly revived the reading society, or else he would sell its books at an auction to recover his money. Members decided to revive the Reading Society and their numbers increased to 38 that year. At that time the Reading Society owned 181 volumes [82]. Thus the Reading Society of Langidalur remained operational through the interest and financial capabilities of one individual.

People were also afraid of contracting tuberculosis through book sharing within the reading societies during the time when tuberculosis was spreading. In one community meetings were forbidden because of an epidemic of influenza which affected the operations of the local reading society [83].

Housing facilities

The social libraries were housed in churches, buildings of the youth associations, in private homes and later in schools and community buildings. Exceptionally a library building was erected for the Reading Society of the Betterment Institute of Flatey in Breiðafjörður [84]. The housing facilities were in many cases poor; and when no housing was available the books were boxed and put into storage until housing could be provided. No services were provided during those times. Book collections were also damaged when kept in unheated houses, and were lost when the buildings housing them were destroyed by fire or heavy winds [85].

Reading societies put their pride in acquiring bookcases for their collections. The picture shows such a bookcase (photograph Kristín H. Pétursdóttir).



The fate of the book collections of the social libraries

In some of the social libraries, thousands of books were collected over time [86]. At the beginning of the 20th century, it is believed that there were around 22, 000 books, thereof around 3000 books in foreign languages, in some 112 reading societies in Iceland [87]. In 1952, seven reading societies had book collections that counted more than two thousand volumes, and in some parts of the country (for example

Suður-Pingeyjarsýsla) there were many reading societies that owned book collections of several thousand volumes. As an example: on its 100th anniversary in 1958 the Reading Society at Mývatn owned 3409 books, thereof 542 in foreign languages [88]. Reading societies in isolated areas, difficult to access, often accumulated a great number of books in comparison to the number of inhabitants. An example was the reading society of Grímsey, an island north of Iceland that in 1952 owned around 1700 volumes; the inhabitants numbered 73 in 1950 [89].

What became the fate of the social book collections that had been built up with such difficulties in various parts of the country?

Some have argued that with the first Public Libraries Act no. 42/1955, the operation of reading societies was discontinued; that they were changed into public libraries; or that their operations were taken over by public libraries, because the reading societies became a part of the public library system when their operations came to be funded publicly by the municipalities and the state [90]. A closer look presents a different picture. In 1955 there were twelve public libraries in operation, apart from the National Library. Outside of Reykjavík there were five town libraries, three county libraries (*sýslubókasöfn*), and three quarter libraries (*amtsbókasöfn*). That year one hundred and sixty seven reading societies delivered reports on their operations and hence received financial state support, of them ten formally became public libraries; the greater number continued to be operated by a private party [91], although they assumed the role of public libraries and formed a part of the public library system. This distinction is important when looking at how the Icelandic public library system developed.

In the 1955 act, it is clearly stated that units of the public library system could be operated by private parties. Thus a rural library should be operated in communities where regional libraries (*héraðsbókasöfn*) were not operated. These rural libraries could be operated by the community, by the reading society or another kind of an association

within the community, and should receive financial support from the community. Moreover, the Act permitted the foundation and operation of publicly funded libraries in schools, old peoples' homes, and in prisons in communities where there was no other library for the public. When these libraries were stationed in schools the headmaster should take care of them [92].

It was known that the names of some of the reading societies changed to a name with the words 'public library' when they became a part of the public library system. On the notion that the name might be indicative of the ownership, I therefore looked at the development of names of units of the public library system over the years as they appeared in documents at the National Archives of Iceland. I assumed that units that contained the words 'reading society' in their names or were libraries of associations, were privately owned and those with the words 'library' or 'public library' in their names indicated a public ownership (of the community). It was, however, hard to say whether a change in name indicated a change in ownership of the book collections without further research; because some reading societies held on to the names of the 'reading societies'. An example is the Reading Society of Svalbarðsströnd (Lestrarfélag Svalbarðsstrandar); keeping the name of the reading society was a manifestation of the fact that local people considered the book collection of the reading society to be their property and under their control [93].

In 1938-1939 reading societies got state support for their operations for the first time in accordance with the Act on Reading Societies and Educational Films, passed in 1937. Then almost 93% of the library collections that got the state support were privately owned, operated by reading societies or another kind of an association; of them 95% (140) bore the name of a reading society or the name of a library of some association, and one the library of a workers union. An additional eleven units of that kind did not receive state support [94].

In 1958, shortly after the first act on public libraries was passed, town and regional libraries counted 31, whereas rural libraries (sveitabókasöfn) and units in rural areas that were operated as a part of

the public library system, were 205. Thereof 105 (around 51%) bore the name of a reading society or were libraries of youth associations, one that of a sports association and one that of a workers union. Nine bore the name of a parish library (sóknarbókasafn). Only one of these small libraries was titled a public library (Almenningsbókasafn Breiðuvíkurbrepps) [95].

In 1972 there were between 180 and 190 small units operated as a part of the public library system; of those seventy one (close to 40%) bore the name of a reading society [96]. Through time proportionally fewer and fewer units bore the words reading society in their name.

It is argued here that receiving public grants does not equal losing ownership over an association (in this instance ownership over the reading societies and their book collections) unless a contract is made to the effect that the book collection of the reading society becomes the property of the community. This was the case in only ten communities in 1955, see above. There were also examples of book collections of reading societies gliding silently into public library collections, and of such collections vanishing altogether subsequent to the Public Libraries Act in 1955 [97]. Of significance is the fact that due to this development these units could not be managed by public authorities; thus excellent proposals drawn up by a committee appointed by the Minister of Education, Science and Culture in 1983 (on the development of the Icelandic public library system) [98] could not be carried out. Furthermore, it has not been possible to develop a standardized and centrally controlled public library system similar to that, which exists in Norway [99]. Because the Icelandic public library system has consisted of units of different ownership, there has been a difference in the quality of their book collections and also in the provision of services.

Given the development described above, it is interesting to investigate how these collections developed further and what role, if any, they played when this was written. The findings of two surveys by the author on the kinds and numbers of service units and of the numbers of staff members in addition to annual reports of public libraries

delivered to the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, were used to get an idea of the developments of reading societies as units in the public library system, in addition to archival documents [100].

Surveys 1989 and 2001

To get an idea of which units of the public library system were privately owned, or considered to be privately owned by their community the same method, as described above, was used, i.e. to analyze their names in reports published by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. It has to be emphasized that very many of the small libraries in the public library system both survey years had originated as reading societies, and might still be considered privately owned in their communities, even when they did not have the words 'reading society' in their name. According to the annual report of public libraries for 1987-1991, 64 units that belonged to the public library system bore a name with the words 'reading society' in 1989. Amongst them was the Reading Society of Munkaþverársókn, noted above, that owned 2580 books in 1989. Of the 64, nine were owned by youth associations and one by a sports association. Their combined book stock was 137, 880 volumes. The largest book collection of a reading society was owned by the youth association "The Iclander" and totalled 15,468 volumes. Ten reading societies that owned a combined total of 13,045 volumes did not receive public financial support in 1989; and the total number of units of the public library system without public financial support in 1989 was 19 [101].

In the 1989 survey, the number of public libraries on which appropriate information was gathered was 163. Of them over 30% still had the name of a 'reading society' or were owned by another kind of an association. Almost 20% (of 163) were amalgamations of different library types that served different kinds of users, mostly of a public and a school library. In addition, four of the small libraries were located in schools, and two of them served the primary schools

in their communities. In both surveys 5 libraries were non-operational at survey time, although not the same ones on both occasions. At that time, the system of the reading societies and small public libraries operated as a part of the public library system by unpaid volunteers outside of the capital area was in some places becoming dysfunctional. This was evident from one of the replies saying that there had been one loan the previous year and none in the present. The respondent found it difficult to see how the operation could diminish any further or that there was a reason to increase services when there was no demand whatsoever for them [102].

According to the annual report for 2001, 28 units of the public library system bore the name of a reading society or were owned by another kind of an association. Of these 28, three were owned by youth associations and one by a sports association. 13 of them, owning 27,830 books, did not receive public financial support. Thereof one belonged to a youth association and one to a sports association. In 2001, the total number of units within the public library system without financial support was 28. The reading societies that received financial support owned a combined book stock of 59,619 volumes. The combined book stock of reading societies in 2001 came to 87,449 volumes [103]. The increment in books in the reading societies and small public libraries that did not receive any public financial support was nil in both years. Moreover, that was also the case in some that did receive such support. In addition to the reading societies there were 25 libraries in institutions such as hospitals and prisons (considered public libraries) in 1989, but in 2001 the number of such libraries had been reduced to 14 [104].

In the 2001 survey appropriate information was gathered on 157 public libraries. Then the number of units bearing the name of a reading society had been reduced to around 18%. At that time the residential pattern of the country has changed greatly. The rural areas had become more sparsely populated, even so that in some areas no one resided during the winter months. This development was met by the amalgamation of municipalities and municipal services; large public

libraries took over the services of the smaller units in several ways. In one municipality the books of a number of reading societies had been boxed and brought to the basement of the municipal library where they remained un-catalogued due to lack of competence and time of staff and they were not used at all. In another municipality these small book collections had stayed in place and were dispersed within the community, without a central catalogue. There the inhabitants enjoyed the services of the town library while the municipal funding was paid to the small units. In yet another municipality the book collections of the reading societies and small public libraries were kept in place, attended by locals with or without pay, and the municipal funding was paid to the town library that was the main municipal library serving the population. There the small collections had been catalogued in the union catalogue of the main municipal library. In other municipalities, work on amalgamating the small public libraries and reading societies within the main municipal library was under way in 2001. In one of the small rural primary schools (with around ten pupils) in the countryside, books of the reading society considered suitable for the pupils, such as those of adventure tales, folk literature and other books had been selected to establish a school library. The library was attended by the students and they checked their loans out and in. The operation of the reading society at Grímsey noted above (that by 2001 owned 2680 volumes) was being discontinued at that time [105].

In 2001, around 62% of the 157 public libraries were amalgamations, mostly of public and school libraries. 15 of the public libraries were located in schools, in addition to two schools being served by the reading societies in their communities [106]. At the beginning of the 21st century most of the reading societies and small public libraries that still had a role to play in their communities were connected to the school system, and many were housed in the school buildings.

One may wonder how the reading societies and small libraries were kept in service, bearing in mind that they were financed on a per capita base and in some of the municipalities there were few res-

idents. In many of these small units the work was accomplished by unpaid volunteers. Their numbers were 95 in 1989, around 13% of the total staff members in libraries in Iceland; and they were close to a quarter of staff in the public library system, numbering 93 out of 379 staff. Public library work in the sparsely populated municipalities was considered a civil duty, sometimes taken on by the members of the municipal council. An example of such work was a late-evening phone call I received as a reply to the survey questionnaire in 1989 from a skipper outside of the capital area who had just returned from sea. He told me that he was on the municipal council and therefore in charge of the public library. Municipal council members were to take turns year by year in attending the library. "Last year was mine" he said, but the lady who should have taken over could not do so because she lived in a remote valley, did not have a car and had no way of getting to the library – so he had to keep that work for another year. He explained that this was not a good solution either because he was so frequently out at sea that he could seldom attend the library in the way he should have. Some such libraries were housed in a room in peoples' homes or in community meeting houses, and did not have regular opening hours. When housed in peoples' homes clients were served when they showed up and when housed in the community meeting houses they were in some cases open for service when an event of some sort took place there. Thus members could borrow or return books at the same time, as they had a reason to come to the community house for some social gathering. Different arrangements certainly did exist. In 1989, one respondent had been in charge of the reading society in his municipality for over sixty years [107].

In 2013, 6 public libraries (almost 8%) out of 78 bore the name of a reading society (still one of them was the Reading Society of Svalbarðsströnd, noted above) [108]. According to an informant, who had housed and attended one of these six reading society for decades, there were in his community thousands of books in reading societies that no one knew what to do with. No one had space to house them any longer. This comment might indicate that the interest in reading

books was declining. Therefore one is bound to ask if public interest in reading educational and recreational material has diminished or if there is another explanation? The reply is that some of the material sought by the reading societies (for instance the legal code [109] and the Parliamentary proceedings) is now available online at the website of Althingi, the Icelandic Parliament (www.althingi.is). It is no longer necessary to go to a library or a reading society to access such material, in particular because of the large percentage (95%) of homes in Iceland that had Internet connections in 2012; moreover 95% of Icelanders used the Internet regularly, daily or at least once per week that year [110]. This in turn points to a great interest still amongst the public in Iceland to acquire knowledge and recreational material.

The book collections of the reading societies may be considered to have taken over the role of the homemade handwritten books read during the evening wakes. They played an important role in providing access to educational and recreational reading material in sparsely populated rural areas in Iceland. and formed a part of the public library system when that was established in 1955. As the population became more condense their role diminished, and during the last quarter of the 20 th century their services were, in most places, gradually taken over by public libraries. According to the findings of the 2001 survey, most of the reading societies and small rural libraries that still seemed to have a role to play in society were connected to or housed in schools.

Research is needed on what kind of a role public libraries, especially in larger municipalities will have in the near future when official information is available online, literary publications in addition to sound recordings are increasingly becoming available online, and an ever increasing number of Icelandic titles, electronically published can be bought online, although not checked out at a library yet. This is because an agreement is still missing on the issue between the authors' Association (Rithöfundasamband Íslands) and the Publishers' Association (Félag bókaútgefenda); and likewise a contract on the issue is

missing between libraries and these parties. However, foreign titles can be bought and/or rented, for example at Amazon.com.

Overview

From the end of the 18th century to the beginning of the 20th century, the same kinds of reading societies and small libraries were established in Iceland as in the neighbouring countries (apart from city libraries) under the influence of the Enlightenment. The difference between the developments in Iceland and those in the neighbouring countries was that the reasons for the foundation of reading societies and small libraries in Iceland could not have been the need of industrialization for a workforce with different education, because in Iceland industrialization began after reading societies came to be founded. Moreover, the difference lies in the number of each kind of reading society and in the social status and age of some of the founders.

In Iceland it was exceptional (only one case is known) that the upper classes founded a reading society aimed at improving the common people, unlike the neighbouring countries where worldly and spiritual leaders established reading societies for the use of the common people to educate and civilize them. Due to Iceland's sparse population, difficult terrain, and underdeveloped road system it was usual for members of all classes in a community to establish a reading society for common use. The communities where the number of upper class citizens needed to found and operate a reading society solely for their own use were few indeed, meaning that such societies would have had to cover a large geographic area (for members to be many enough), which did not work because of the primitive transportation system. In the same community all had to join in the operation and use of the same reading society. Exceptions to this were the reading societies at the fishing stations noted above, because during the fishing seasons great numbers of people gathered there. Because of Iceland's sparse population, difficult terrain, and underdeveloped road system it was

impossible to operate separate reading societies for particular classes of people in the same community and likewise in more communities.

Community isolation also meant that there was a tradition for the inhabitants to help themselves; waiting for others to come to solve their problems would not have worked. Torstensson's [111] argument that because of a lack of nobility, Icelandic and Norwegian farmers were stronger and more independent and formed their own reading societies is also valid here. Moreover a middle class hardly existed in Iceland in the 19th century. The reason might be that because of their independence Icelandic farmers assumed the status both of the nobility and the middle class and therefore felt both able and obliged to found their own reading societies, thus providing educational reading material for members of their households. Due to the historic development of the public library system in Iceland it is neither standardized nor has it been possible to control it centrally (as is the case in some neighbouring countries).

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